

Zennor Quoit Preserv'd

OUR FOURTH SPECIMEN of megalithic verse, taken from a longer epic poem by Charles Taylor Stephens, returns to Zennor Quoit. We are grateful to Mr. Peter Pool, who presents it, and who has contributed appropriate notes.

A farmer had more bone than brain;
He 'neath the quoit bestowed much pain
To make a cattle shed.
In vain men told him he might spare
Himself the toil, and said 'twas there
The Piskies made their bed.

Till Master to the rescue flew,
And begged the farmer not to do
That horrid sacrilege:

Then for a crown the man declared
The quoit by him should be revered;
And to the nearest hedge

He fixed his shed: but horse and ass
Refuse to shelter in that place,
So now 'tis overgrown
With rank and noxious deadly weeds,
And from their buds in clouds the seeds
All o'er his farm are blown,

To fall, with ever with'ring brand,
And render desolate his land
Who would the quoit defile.

(From *The Chief of Barat-Anac*, 1862: Charles Taylor Stephens)

This cautionary tale recounts how in 1861 Zennor Quoit narrowly escaped destruction; more details are given in an extract from the *Cornish Telegraph* of 4th September 1861:—

A farmer had removed a part of one of the upright pillars, and drilled a hole into the slanting quoit, in order to erect a cattle-shed, when news of the vandalism reached the ears of the Rev. W. Borlase, Vicar of Zennor, and for 5s. the work of destruction was stayed, the Vicar having thus strengthened the legend that the quoit cannot be removed.

The 'Rev. W. Borlase' referred to was William Borlase, Vicar of Zennor from 1852 until his death in 1888, and a great-grandson of his namesake, Dr. William Borlase the antiquary. At some date after 1754, when Dr. Borlase in his *Antiquities of Cornwall* illustrated the quoit with capstone *in situ*, the western supporting stone broke and the capstone slipped to its present position. J. O. Halliwell in 1861 (*Rambles in Western Cornwall*, p. 137) said that this collapse had happened 'some years ago', and it seems likely that it was due to natural causes; certainly it had no connection with the events described in the poem, traces of which however remain in drill-holes in the stones of the quoit, the partial destruction of one of the eastern portal stones, and the ruins of a shed nearby. The later history of the monument is described by Prof. Charles Thomas and Dr. Bernard Wailes in an appendix to the excavation report on the nearby Sperris Quoit (*CA* 6 (1967), 15).

Charles Taylor Stephens, who died at St. Ives in 1863, was a shoemaker and for some years rural postman from St. Ives to Zennor; he was also employed by Robert Hunt in the collection of folk-tales from the Zennor area. *The Chief of Barat-Anac* was published in 1862, the author describing it as 'solely an effort to live by the fruits of his own industry' after 11 years of sickness and privation. In the poem the postman-narrator falls asleep while seeking Zennor Quoit in a mist, and in a dream beholds the nine muses and a prehistoric chieftain accompanied by a host of followers. After hearing sundry songs and proclamations forming the greater part of the poem, the narrator awakes and makes his way to Zennor Churchtown, where the Vicar's maid tells him of the recent escape of the quoit as printed above.

While the poetic talent displayed is perhaps not high, the extract here published gives what is probably an accurate account of the saving of our most famous Cornish megalith by one of the timeliest investments of 5s. that can ever have been made.

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